

Healing hands: How two nurses took wounded soldiers home

Ann Weddington is the marketing director at Jeff Anderson Regional Medical Center in Meridian. She has worked at the hospital for 10 years.

Her story is about two nurses, Charles Helms and Kem McEntyre, whose lives overlap — whether they're in Meridian working at JARMC or deployed with the Mississippi Air National Guard in support of the U.S. War on Terror.

"Many people contributed to this article," Ann said. "It was so interesting learning more about the military experiences of two of our staff members, especially since they work in the same hospital department."

By Ann Weddington
special to The Star

Charles Helms and Kem McEntyre have been a team for years in the Intensive Care and Cardiovascular Recovery Unit at Jeff Anderson Regional Medical Center.

When they were called to active duty in Iraq in 2003, they still worked as a team — only half a world away from each other. Helms prepared wounded soldiers for evacuation from Iraq, and McEntyre received them back in The States.

"In all the missions I flew I never had one soldier go bad," said McEntyre, who was called from his seven-year job as a staff nurse to serve in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"Hauling back the Marines was an awesome experience, to see how gung-ho they were to protect our country. It is engraved in them to be with their unit and protect their fellow soldier. Every Marine I talked to expressed a desire to get better so that they could return to help their unit."

Passing from one hand to another

But before McEntyre and nurses like him could receive injured soldiers, Helms had first to evacuate the soldiers safely. It was a difficult task in the country's primitive third-world conditions and the enemy attacks at the base with mortars and rockets. His encounters with the Iraqi people helped make up for it.

"My contact with Iraqi nationals was very limited, but those I did see, treat or talk to were friendly, courageous and grateful the Americans were in Iraq," said Helms, who served overseas until March 2004.

As an ICU nurse in a U.S. Air Force field hospital, it was Helms' job to treat coalition and enemy soldiers, prepare wounded soldiers for evacuation from Iraq and load them onto planes headed for their respective homes. Many children who were injured by bombs and terrorists were also treated by his unit.

Helms applauded the work being done by U.S. servicemen in Iraq. "While I was on duty, the Air National Guard units stayed on the base, but the Army units in Kirkuk traveled outside the base," he said.

"Their medical teams worked side-by-side with Iraqi physicians in Iraqi hospitals. They provided medicines, equipment and knowledge to Iraqi physicians and provided joint medical team surgeries on Iraqi citizens."

While there, he also witnessed the distribution of tons of school supplies, toys, clothing, food, candy and time to Kirkuk children — all donated by American citizens and distributed by Air Force personnel. He was proud to see his fellow Americans working civilian jobs to rebuild Iraq's oil industry and other urban projects.

Back at Andrews AFB

Back home in The States, at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, McEntyre received soldiers from Ramstein Air Base, Germany, and sent them to their respective home bases.

"Most of the soldiers were fairly stable, but some had to be closely monitored," McEntyre said. "We were a flying hospital outfitted with all the necessary medical and emergency equipment."

McEntyre also learned about the deep psychological trauma that comes with war by listening to the stories of soldiers.

"It is a real privilege to serve in the military and be able to help protect and defend the freedom that we have," McEntyre said.

"The stateside mission my unit had may not have been a glory-type assignment like being in Iraq, but I thought it was the best mission to have because we got to take our brave wounded soldiers home. I made a special point to thank each soldier for their service while we were transporting them."

"We may wear the same uniform, but they were the ones who put their lives on the line for us dodging bullets and mortars, living in foxholes and eating MRE's every meal. Thank goodness we have folks willing to do this."

The home front

McEntyre said support from home helped tremendously although he worried about his wife, Robin, and the stresses she endured running a household by herself, working a full-time job and having sole responsibility for their daughter, 7-year-old Molly.

"I want to thank my family for the outstanding job they did keeping up with things at home while I was gone. I also wanted to thank Jeff Anderson Regional Medical Center and the staff in ICU for all the support and prayers and for taking up my slack while I away from my job."

Helms said the calls, e-mails and photos he received from his family meant a lot.

"It was hard to be away from my family, especially around the holidays, but we were lucky to have the technology of e-mail. E-mail helped us stay in touch almost daily," he said.

"We were also able to help those wounded soldiers who were brought to our base communicate with their own families. I want to especially thank my wife, Tammy, and my children for giving me so much support while I was away."

ICU/CVR Nurse Manager Kim Lawson said she was proud of how the rest of the unit's staff pitched in to fill the shifts left vacant by Helms' and McEntyre's deployment.

TWO OF OUR OWN

Kem McEntyre

In civilian life, Kem McEntyre is a seven-year employee of Jeff Anderson Regional Medical Center, working as a staff nurse in the Intensive Care/ Cardiovascular Recovery Unit.

In his military life, he is a captain assigned to the Mississippi Air National Guard's 183rd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron in Jackson, where he is a flight nurse. During his service, he was awarded the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, the Armed Forces Reserve Medal with "M" Device and the Air Force Achievement Medal.

He was released from active duty in September 2004.

Charles Helms

In civilian life, Helms has worked for 10 years as a staff RN in Jeff Anderson Regional Medical Center's Intensive Care/ Cardiovascular Recovery Unit. He and his wife, Tammy, have two children, Ashley, 16, and Tyler, 14.

In the military, Helms is attached to the Mississippi Air National Guard at Key Field in the 186th Medical Group, where he is a captain and staff nurse.

His awards include the National Defense Medal 2nd Device, the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, the Armed Forces Reserve Medal with "M" Device, the Air Force Achievement Medal and a Certificate of Appreciation for the role he played in the capture of Saddam Hussein by treating wounded Iraqis who supplied the military with information that eventually lead to the Hussein's capture.



FLYING HOSPITAL

Nurse Kem McEntyre, right, is a member of the Mississippi Air National Guard's 183rd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron. He supported Operation Iraqi Freedom as a flight nurse stationed at Andrews Air Force Base. McEntyre is shown aboard a medical transport plane called the "flying hospital."

SUBMITTED PHOTO

A TEAM IN CIVILIAN AND MILITARY LIFE

Charles Helms, left, and Kem McEntyre, nurses in the Intensive Care and Cardiovascular Recovery Unit at Jeff Anderson Regional Medical Center, prepare to move a patient. They were also a team when they were called to active duty in 2003. Helms is a member of the Mississippi Air National Guard's 186th Medical Group; he prepared wounded personnel in Iraq for evacuation. McEntyre is a member of the Mississippi Air National Guard's 183rd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron; he received them stateside and saw them home.

PHOTO BY PAULA MERRIT / THE MERIDIAN STAR

